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SUBJECT: BEN ALI ANNOUNCES HE WILL RUN FOR REELECTION IN 2009

REF: A. TUNIS 841
[¶](#)B. TUNIS 645

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[¶](#)1. (C) President Ben Ali announced on July 30 that he would run for reelection in 2009. His announcement was part of his speech opening the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) congress that takes place July 30 - August 2.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas attended the session and gave a short speech praising Ben Ali and Tunisia's support for the Palestinians. Representatives of five loyal opposition parties and various civil society groups also attended and spoke at the session. All praised the RCD and Ben Ali, with several endorsing (or reiterating earlier endorsements) of his candidacy in 2009. End Summary.

As Expected...

[¶](#)2. (C) On July 30, during the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party congress, President Ben Ali announced that, "in response to your (the people's) appeal," he would run for reelection in 2009. Various groups have been calling on Ben Ali to run for reelection for almost two years, and the congress itself was littered with flags and signs calling on Ben Ali to run in 2009. His speech was repeatedly interrupted by party members chanting his name and calling on him to run. His declaration was made before the diplomatic corps, five loyal Tunisian opposition parties, the UGTT (the umbrella union), UTICA (the umbrella business association), the UNFT (women's association), and other civil society groups, several of which also gave speeches. Several of these groups have already endorsed Ben Ali's candidacy; some of the loyal opposition representatives were even wearing the RCD's Ben Ali buttons. Among those not invited: the opposition at-Tajdid Party, Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), and Democratic Forum for Liberty and Labor (FDTL). This congress marks the fifth RCD congress since Ben Ali came to power. In his speech, Ben Ali characterized the day he became president, often referred to as "the Blessed Change," as "part of the saving of the country."

[¶](#)3. (SBU) The theme of the RCD's congress, which takes place from July 30- August 2, is "Challenge." Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas attended the congress and gave a short speech in which he praised Ben Ali and Tunisia's support for the Palestinians.

¶4. (C) In his speech, Ben Ali said the RCD has served as a "space for dialogue and discussion" and as a "forum for the exchange of views on all national and international issues and concerns." His speech paid special attention to economic concerns, such as increasing investment and job creation, especially for university graduates, in all areas of Tunisia.

Referring to the recent unrest in Gafsa, (reftels), the President cautioned the RCD to guard against, "malevolent opportunists" trying to "exploit news and events, to exaggerate their extent, to falsify them, and to distort them."

¶5. (C) Ben Ali also lauded the RCD's social programs. He noted that the RCD had recently added several young people to the RCD's Central Committee as part of its youth outreach initiative. He praised the RCD's "Dialogue with Youth" which he said would lead to a "National Youth Pact," though he did not elaborate on what specifically the Pact would entail. Ben Ali also dwelt on the importance of women's rights, pledging that women would hold at least 30 percent of seats in the RCD's Central Committee, the Chamber of Deputies, the Chamber of Advisors, and Municipal Councils. The President reiterated that the RCD is committed to a partnership with civil society and strives to promote democracy and pluralism.

Ben Ali also broached this issue of "alternation in power," stating that, "this issue is already settled by the Constitution." He went on to characterize alternation in power as a "fundamental principal of our republican system," concluding that, "We consider that the people's choice is the rule for alternation, and that the Constitution is the decisive arbiter for all."

¶6. (C) The President also announced changes to the structure of the RCD. Articles 23 and 27 of the RCD's Internal Regulations will be modified to create a "Council for Freedom-fighters and Great Militants" whose members would also be considered members of the Central Committee. In addition, he explained that standing committees within the Central Committee would be created to examine "the themes and issues submitted to them by the RCD Chairman" with the goal of implementing initiatives developed during the national congress. Lastly, he stated that the party would reduce the number of RCD vice-presidents to one.

Comment

¶7. (C) The RCD congress takes place over several days. Post will report more extensively on the congress after it concludes on August 2. There are various rumors about RCD and government re-shuffling that may take place over the course of the congress or the days following. For example, there has been some speculation that Minister of the Interior Rafik Belhaj Kacem will be named RCD Secretary General. End Comment.

GODEC